

Examining the Impact of Discourse Analysis in Project-based Learning in the Promotion of Communicative Competence

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Introduction

Many Japanese university students lack a clear purpose when they study English, because they regard it as an academic subject rather than as a medium of communication. Although they possess a large amount of knowledge of English, they do not know how to use it effectively. As a result, their use of English is relatively limited. Project-based learning (PBL), with its focus on student autonomy and authenticity, is a teaching module that instructors can use to encourage their students to talk more freely about specific genres thereby improving their communicative competence in the second language. By introducing discourse analysis to students, instructors can maximize the learning impact that PBL has on students. In this paper, I describe a PBL task that I used in a class of 24 university students and analyze its effectiveness in promoting my students' communicative competence (linguistic, cognitive, sociolinguistic and discourse competencies). I based my examination of discourse analysis and the project's effectiveness on my observations, results from student questionnaires and the students' own analysis of their recorded performances.

What is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis focuses on language use by members of a speech community and examines their language form and function. Such analysis includes the study of both spoken interaction and written texts and involves the identification of linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors. Discourse analysis helps in the interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk (Demo, 2001).

What is PBL?

PBL is an integrated approach to English language teaching that brings together content knowledge and skills development. It provides a way for students to develop language skills while doing meaningful projects with a focus on an authentic, relevant task (Fried-Booth, 2002). It demands a high degree of interactive negotiation among students which provides them with an outline of clear goals and procedures and, in so doing, stretches their communicative competence. PBL requires students to use all the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing in the second language in conducting their class work and empowers them in the learning process by stressing their active participation and giving them responsibilities at each level of the project.

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were twenty-four second and third-year students enrolled in a general English communication course at a private university in Tokyo. The students were mixed majors who ranged from low-intermediate to high-intermediate in English ability.

Question

The study sought to answer the following question: How effective is the combination of discourse analysis and PBL in promoting students' communicative competence in the second language?

Description of Project

The specific goal of this project was for students to research a company that they chose on their own, write a resume in English and then take part in a mock interview for a position in the company. I served as the mock interviewer. The interview was filmed and audio-recorded. Students worked together in small groups and engaged themselves in the various stages of topic selection, research, discussion of the research, interview preparation, interviewing and evaluation. I informed the students that my role in this project was that of a facilitator and, finally, as an interviewer/evaluator. I explained that I would respond to their questions with suggestions, but they were responsible for making their own decisions. Students conducted their in-class work entirely in English. A considerable amount of the work was conducted outside of class. The project lasted seven weeks and followed the stages outlined by Legutke and Thomas (1991):

1. Opening (Week 1) I arranged students into groups of four members each and instructed them to answer the following questions pertaining to careers and employment:

- What career are you interested in?
- What kind of company would you like to work for?

- What work environment would suit you the best?
- How would you prepare for a job interview?
- How do you think western-style interviews differ from Japanese-style interviews?

I encouraged the students to think of any additional questions to ask their group members related to careers and employment. After they completed this answer and question session, I explained the details of the project to them.

I informed them that the project would require each group to research an international company of their choice, write a resume with that company in mind, and prepare for a mock interview for a specific position in the company. At this point, each group selected a company and informed me of their selection. The groups selected the following companies: Apple, Burberry, Coach, Gap, Ikea and Starbucks. For homework, I instructed the students to conduct research of their companies, specifically about employment possibilities, and bring their information to the next class meeting.

2. Topic Orientation and Research (Weeks 2 and 3) The groups discussed the research they had collected about their companies. I instructed them to decide on one common position per group and informed them that they would interview for this position at the end of the project. I told the students to imagine their employment prospects for obtaining the position by answering the following questions:

- What skills do you need for this position?
- What opportunities for advancement are there in this company?
- What types of people does this company like to hire?
- What responsibilities are associated with the position you selected?

After discussing their research, I instructed the students to write a detailed group paper describing their company and the position they had chosen.

3. Interview Preparation (Weeks 4 and 5) I provided students with several sample copies of English-language resumes of varying formats and instructed them to note the differences among them. I assigned students the task of writing their own resume with their company's position in mind. Students were free to choose the resume format they desired. In addition, I distributed a list of typical interview questions and had the students practice answering them. I have listed the questions as follows:

- Would you please describe your university life?
- Would you please tell me three positive characteristics about yourself?

- Would you please tell me three negative characteristics about yourself?
- Why do you think we should hire you for this position?
- Where would you like to be 10 years from now?
- How would you describe yourself?
- Would you be willing to relocate to another city if we ask you?
- Would you say you are a group-worker or more of an individualist?
- What are your accomplishments?
- Who do you most admire?

I encouraged them to think of follow-up questions that the interviewer might ask in addition to the questions listed above. Students added their own questions to this list, too. For homework in week #4, I assigned students the task of researching 10 vocabulary words commonly used in English interviews and/or in their company. They shared these words with their group members in class the following week.

In week #5, I showed the students several film clips of actual group employment interviews in which I instructed them to analyze and evaluate how the interviewees used the following discourse items:

- Backchanneling — (“That’s right,” “exactly,” “absolutely,” “I understand,” and nonverbal head-nods).
- Body language — (how the interviewees sat, placed their hands and legs, and where they looked while their fellow interviewees were being asked questions).
- Transition words/phrases — (first, following this, consequently, therefore, etc.)
- Elaborating — (answers to questions, particularly yes/no questions).

The students discussed how the interviewees used the above-listed discourse items in their groups.

4. Interviews (Week 6) I assigned the six groups appointment times for their interviews. Group members entered the room together and greeted me at the door with a copy of their resume in hand. Each group of four members sat behind a long table. I asked several different questions to each interviewee and also asked them to ask me questions. Each group interview lasted for 15 minutes.

5. Evaluations (Week 7) I evaluated students’ performances in equal parts on their use of backchanneling, body language, transition words and elaboration of their answers. I showed the filmed interviews to the students and had them evaluate themselves and their classmates using the same criteria I had used.

Questionnaires

I distributed questionnaires to the students who completed them in class after the completion of the project. The questionnaire findings are presented in Table 1. The answers to Question #1 reveal that there was no one dominant answer in how the students viewed their interview performances. However in Question #2, an overwhelming number of students agreed that elaboration presented the most difficulty in the interviews. It is interesting to note in the answers to Question #3, a great majority of the students thought that watching their interviews was very helpful in realizing their strengths and weaknesses, while no one thought it was not helpful. In answering Question #4, a majority indicated that they had learned new things about English-language interviews than they had previously known. Finally, in Questions #5, and #6 the majority of students answered that they communicated more in English because they studied in a group, and spoke more English than they do in other English communication courses.

Table 1 Results of Students' Questionnaire Answers

Questions + Answers	Numbers of Students
1. What did you notice most about your interview performance on film?	
a. I didn't understand all the questions.	5
b. I didn't look directly at the interviewer.	7
c. I didn't speak loud enough.	5
d. I made many silent pauses.	7
2. Which language features were the most difficult for you in the interview?	
a. Backchanneling	4
b. Body language	2
c. Transition words	2
d. Elaboration	16
3. How helpful was watching your interview in making you realize your strengths and weaknesses?	
a. Very helpful.	17
b. Helpful.	5
c. A little helpful.	2
d. Not helpful.	0

4. Did you learn new things about English-language interviews?	
a. A considerable amount.	20
b. A little more than average.	3
c. Average amount	1
d. A small amount.	0
e. Nothing.	0
5. Did you communicate more in English because you worked in a group than if you had studied alone?	
a. Much more.	15
b. A little more.	6
c. The same amount as if I had studied alone.	3
6. Did you speak more English while doing this project than you usually do in your other English communication classes?	
a. Yes.	19
b. No.	2
c. The same.	3

Note: Students were instructed to select only one answer to each question.

Journal Entries

I encouraged students to keep journals throughout the course of their projects. The journals offered students the opportunity to reflect on their participation in their projects and also gave me an insight into their thoughts about their experiences with PBL. The entries were written in the last few minutes of every class and outside of class too. The journals were anonymous and were submitted to me on the last day of the project lessons. Samples of some of their comments in no particular order are as follows:

- It was interesting to learn about my company.
- I used English a lot.
- I could learn a lot of new business words.
- I learned a lot about my company on the internet.
- I got to know everyone in class.
- I learned how to answer interview questions.
- The interview made me nervous!
- There was too much homework.

- I liked this project.
- I need to use more elaboration.
- It was like a real interview.
- Business English is difficult.
- There are many ways to write a resume.
- I tried to use transition words more.
- It was fun to learn together.
- I needed more time to practice the interview.
- I want to do another interview in English.
- The interview gave me confidence.
- I can write an English resume now.
- I like learning about international companies.
- I learned about different jobs.
- I could understand my mistakes better by watching myself.

Observations

The project gave me the freedom to circulate among the groups and closely observe them as they participated in their class work. I noticed they approached their PBL lessons much differently than they had in their earlier non-PBL lessons. These differences were evident in the amount of English they spoke with each other while carrying out different points of their project. At the start of the project I was concerned that students would not communicate sufficiently with each other in English, so I had them adhere to an *English only* class rule at the beginning of the project. Most of them adhered to this rule, although there were some occasional lapses at the beginning of the project. I estimate that 80% of in-class communication was conducted in English.

The change in the overall class atmosphere was the most noticeable difference to develop from implementing PBL in the classroom. Soon after starting their projects, students became very animated, energetic and focused while carrying out their PBL class work (discussing their company, writing their resumes, practicing their interview questions). The vast majority of the students were eager to ask me questions and participate in discussions with their group members. The lively atmosphere was very different from the one that had prevailed in the non-PBL lessons. Then, the students were passive, quiet and answered my questions only when I asked them directly.

Discussion

The data and information obtained from my observations, the student journals and the questionnaire results reveal that combining discourse analysis with PBL resulted in an increase in my students' English-language communicative competence. Such success would have been very difficult to replicate in a more traditional, teacher-fronted learning activity/class.

In allowing my students to analyze their own discourse, they developed a higher awareness of how they communicate in the second language. Involving students in their own learning can be a very rewarding and motivating experience as students examine their linguistic strengths and weaknesses (Riggenbach, 1999). For the majority of my students, providing them with the opportunity to analyze their own discourse motivated them to really think about not just what they were conveying in English but how they were doing it.

PBL is a teaching module with an emphasis on autonomy and authenticity through its use of realistic, relevant tasks. These characteristics, combined with the demand that students must actively participate in the whole learning process, make it a very powerful way to promote their communicative competence in the second language.

PBL also promotes autonomous learning by placing a major part of the learning responsibilities on the students and their groups (Legutke and Thomas, 1991). Therefore, it is not surprising that students in PBL classes are usually more independent in their approach to learning than students in traditional, teacher-fronted classes. In PBL activities, the teacher still has a role to play but it is more of a facilitator or guide (Stoller, 1997).

This aspect of autonomy was also evident in my PBL lessons in this study. My students chose their companies, positions, type of resume, and conducted their research and subsequent discussions on their own. It became apparent to me that they felt very comfortable and confident in engaging in activities without my direct involvement, even though this was their first exposure to PBL lesson work.

The fact that the PBL lessons provided my students with the opportunity to have a say in what or how they should learn was the major reason for their smooth and effortless transition to this type of learning module. The students were evidently empowered by their enhanced role in the project and this empowerment, in turn, encouraged them to work harder than before. It is this emphasis on autonomy that motivates students to learn more than in traditional language learning classrooms that do not offer an autonomous learning environment to their learners (Dornyei, 2001).

Authenticity was another reason for the improvement in my students' communicative competence. They were very focused on learning as much as they could about their companies, and practicing for their interviews. The interview provided the students with a final goal and pushed them to polish their language skills and accumulate relevant knowledge in a very authentic way. Although it was a mock interview, the format and the questions were very real. After graduation these students will have to interview for actual positions, so it was relatively easy to make them understand why this project could be of benefit to them beyond just the language-learning component.

The authentic nature of the interview task cannot be underestimated. The research materials provided my students with authentic language that they were able to use in communicating with one another on a very realistic plane. According to Rost (2002), input should aim for 'user authenticity,' first, by aiming to be appropriate to the current needs of the learners, and second by reflecting

real use of language in the ‘real world.’

Conclusion

In this paper, I explain how my students became active participants in their own learning process through the combination of discourse analysis and PBL. The data and information that I obtained from my observations, the student journals and the questionnaire results reveal that PBL was very effective in promoting an awareness of how my students communicate in the second language. This success was due to the autonomous nature of PBL, the authentic relevance with which my students viewed the interviews, and the positive impact that analyzing their own discourse had on them. Discourse analysis and PBL tasks provide that ideal learning environment in which to promote communicative competence in the second language.

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Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect research information about your participation in this project. Select only one answer to each question:

1. What did you notice most about your interview performance on film?
 - a. I didn't understand the questions.
 - b. I didn't look directly at the interviewer.
 - c. I didn't speak loud enough.
 - d. I made many silent pauses.

2. Which language features were the most difficult for you in the interview?
 - a. Backchanneling
 - b. Body language
 - c. Transition words
 - d. Elaboration

3. How helpful was watching your interview in making you realize your strengths and weaknesses?
 - a. Very helpful.
 - b. Helpful.
 - c. A little helpful.
 - d. Not helpful.

4. Did you learn new things about English-language interviews?
 - a. A considerable amount.
 - b. A little more than average.
 - c. Average amount
 - d. A small amount.
 - e. Nothing.

5. Did you communicate more in English because you worked in a group than if you had studied alone?
 - a. Much more.
 - b. A little more.
 - c. The same amount as if I had studied alone.

6. Did you speak more English while doing this project than you usually do in your other English communication classes?
 - a. Yes.
 - b. No.
 - c. The same.